

How to write a book

Roger S Kirby

Doctors write books primarily to gain recognition from their peers and credibility with their patients. The key steps involve careful planning of the project, finding the right publisher, ensuring the text is completed on time, and scrupulous checking of the proofs. The end product should be something of which the author is justifiably proud.

As a busy doctor, what on earth would compel you to write a book? There are all sorts of motives, but most do it for recognition by their patients and peers. It is also very fulfilling to see your own thoughts and views on display in printed form. Although less academically prestigious than peer-reviewed papers, books usually appeal to a wider audience and bestow their own particular credibility on the author. The potential for royalties should also not be discounted.

GETTING STARTED

So how to set about the task? First decide upon your subject. What is the competition in terms of other books in

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the area? A literature search is essential and it is worth asking around if there are already other titles in the pipeline. Don't be too put off by similar competitor titles, however; there are very few areas of medicine that are covered by a single book on the subject.

Second, decide upon your audience. Are you writing for specialists in the area, GPs, patients or the general public? Clearly the style and content will need to be targeted accordingly.

Finally, you need to find a publisher. A recurring complaint from my colleagues who have written books is that they feel their publishers have not marketed their volumes properly. This certainly is an important consideration; in general, smaller publishers have fewer resources to undertake

mail shots and to make sure that the book is displayed on the bookstands at appropriate meetings of specialist societies. Ask around and find a publisher with a good track record. A list of medical publishers is supplied in Table 1. Try and speak to some of the authors who have worked with them. What were their experiences? Did they get the support they needed? Did they receive their royalties promptly and in full?

Once you have decided on your subject and you have a publisher interested, he or she will require an outline of proposed chapters, their contents and a list of potential authors. At this stage you need to decide whether to:

1. Write a monograph yourself

TABLE 1.
Some medical book publishers in the UK

Company	Address	Phone	Fax	Web address
Blackwell Science Ltd	Blackwell Science Ltd, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0EL	+44 (0)1865 206206	+44 (0)1865 721205	www.blackwell-science.com
BMJ Publishing Group	British Medical Association, BMA House, Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JR	+44 (0)20 7387 4499	+44 (0)20 7383 6418	www.bmj.com
Butterworth Heinemann	Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP	+44 (0)1865 310366	+44 (0)1865 310043	www.bh.com
Cambridge University Press	Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU	+44 (0)1223 312393	+44 (0)1223 315052	uk.cambridge.org/
Elsevier Science Ltd UK	The Boulevard, Langford Lane, Kidlington, Oxford OX5 1GB	+44 (0)1865 843000	+44 (0)1865 843950	www.elsevier.nl
Harcourt Publishers Ltd	Harcourt Place, 32 Jamestown Road, London NW1 7BY	+44 (0)20 7424 4200	+44 (0)20 7424 4420	www.harcourt-international.com
Health Press	Elizabeth House, Queen Street, Abingdon, Oxford OX14 3JR	+44 (0)1235 523233	+44 (0)1235 523238	www.healthpress.co.uk
Martin Dunitz Ltd	The Livery House, 7-9 Pratt Street, London NW1 0AE	+44 (0)20 7482 2202	+44 (0)20 7267 0159	www.dunitz.co.uk
Oxford University Press	Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP	+44 (0) 1865 556767	+44 (0) 1865 556646	www.oup.co.uk
Radcliffe Medical Press Ltd	18 Marcham Road, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 1AA	+44 (0) 1235 528820	+44 (0) 1235 528830	www.radcliffe-oxford.com
Springer-Verlag Limited	Sweetapple House, Catteshall Road, Godalming, Surrey GU7 3DJ	+44 (0)1483 418800	+44 (0)1483 415151	www.springer.co.uk

TABLE 2.
Rules of effective writing

Avoid trying to impress your reader with your extensive vocabulary
Try to use as few words as possible
Use short rather than long words
Use synonyms only when writing for specialists
Restrict sentences to 15–20 words
Use bullet points and illustrations to break up blocks of text
Avoid clichés (like the plague!)
Use different levels of headings
Make sure arithmetic is correct and statistics accurate
Always keep your reader and your message in mind

From Kirby (2000)

2. Work with two or three colleagues, dividing the subject up according to their interests and expertise
3. Edit, or co-edit, a full-blown multi-author textbook.

Personally I prefer the first or second options, because the third involves the rather tiresome task of chasing those contributors whose chapters are always ‘in the pipeline’ and never on your desk! Moreover, in the new world of e-publishing and web sites, the importance of the ‘standard text’ seems likely to decline. If you choose to work with colleagues and friends, make sure that they share your commitment to the task and preferably have some previous writing experience. There is nothing more dispiriting than having to rewrite other authors’ sections because they are not up to scratch.

At this stage, you and your co-authors will each be sent a contract from the publisher. You should read this carefully because it is a legal document. At this point, you may need some negotiating skills because this is the time to make sure that you are happy with your royalty (Fisher et al, 1981). Don’t be surprised if the percentage is small; most doctors publish for prestige rather than money. If you have a track record in publishing, however, you may be able to negotiate an increase in the royalty before you sign the contract. If the book is purchased and distributed by a pharmaceutical company, the royalty payment will obviously reflect the overall volume of sales.

START WRITING

The next step is to get started on the writing (Kirby, 2000). At this point time management is critical. First make a detailed plan. I usually ‘free write’ my ideas, then organize them and reorganize again so that I am sure where I am going. Then set a time-frame including a start date, a completion date and progress monitoring stages. Be realistic, and add 20% extra as contingency time. It has been discovered that most of us do 80% of our productive work in 20% of our time; this is especially true of writing, which does require a great deal of focused effort. Work out when your most creative and productive period is (for most of us it is first thing in the morning) and plan out some dedicated writing time, ideally in 2-hour portions, in a place where you cannot be disturbed.

Once you start, the project takes on a life of its own and the going usually gets progressively easier. Try to write directly onto a PC or laptop because this is more time efficient and often enhances writing style and composition. Don’t forget to back up your files.

Write clearly and in plain English. Be simple but not simplistic. The rules of effective writing are set out in *Table 2*. After you have written a section, check it carefully and if possible ask someone else, a friend, colleague or spouse, to read it and make comments. Use software such as Reference Manager™ (ISI

Researchsoft, Thompson Scientific, Berkley, California) to facilitate the referencing of the text. Don’t quote every paper written on the subject, only those germane to your central argument. In general, medical writers are too sparing with illustrations because they tend to think in terms of words rather than images. In fact, a good illustration can convey a great deal of information, and save a good deal of explanatory text. In addition, illustrations help to break up blocks of text and make it more user-friendly for the reader.

SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT

When you are happy with your contribution, send it off in duplicate and in electronic format to your publisher with a covering letter. Then wait! After what seems an age you will receive your manuscript back with sub-editor’s queries marked. Go through the text again, carefully answering the queries.

Because of the time lapse the material you wrote will often seem quite strange to you. A few up-to-date references can be added but try to resist fiddling too much with the manuscript, just get it back to the publisher. The next stage is usually the colour proofs which are always exciting but do need checking scrupulously for errors. Again, resist the temptation to change things unnecessarily, simply do the necessary and get them back to the publisher.

If you are working on a multi-author book then, as editor, you will also have to check the manuscripts of other contributors. This is often quite hard work, but does need to be done thoroughly. Don’t worry too much about minor grammatical errors or syntax: these will be dealt with by the professional sub-editor. Your job is to look at the bigger picture. Is the message clear, is there overlap with other chapters, what is the reviewer in the *New England Journal of Medicine* going to say about this in relation to the rest of the book? You as editor have to maintain quality control. And what do you do about the recalcitrant authors who still fail to send in their

manuscripts? Call them, e-mail them, write to them. Keep the pressure on! If the piece of work is still not forthcoming then you have a number of choices:

1. Drop the chapter — is it essential to the book?
2. Write it yourself or find someone else to write it in a short time frame
3. As a last resort you could commission professional medical writers to

write chapters for authors based on their published work. This is an expedient but expensive remedy.

Most books need a foreword and a preface. The foreword is an opportunity to ask an eminent colleague to endorse the book and hopefully say some flattering things about the content. The preface is contributed by the author(s) and should explain why the book was written, its basic message and for whom it is written.

Some publishers also ask you to supply the ‘blurb’ describing the contents for the back cover. This should not be undertaken lightly since many sales are made on the basis of potential purchasers browsing through the back cover notes. The final task is to check carefully that the author details and chapter list are correct. Reviewers love to nitpick and contributors hate to have their name spelt incorrectly.

Finally, wait until the book appears and try to persuade the publishers to fund a champagne party to celebrate the launch. Come on all you budding authors, boot up your laptops and you’re off!

HM

Conflict of interest: none.

Fisher R, Ury W, Patton B (1981) *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Penguin, London

Kirby R (2000) Effective Communication. In: Kirby R, Mundy A, eds. *How to Succeed as A Hospital Doctor*. Health Press, Oxford: 55–78

KEY POINTS

- Plan your book carefully.
- Always keep your audience in mind.
- Negotiate your royalties with your publisher.
- Ensure you complete the project on time.
- Check proofs scrupulously for errors.

Medical publishing series

This series, which started in October 2000, will include articles on:

- Finding health information on the internet (health professionals)
- Finding health information on the internet (consumers)
- Writing case reports: an editor’s eye view
- How to write a book
- Getting a book published
- Being a journal editor
- Writing for the popular press
- How to write a review article
- How to write a good peer review
- Writing a CD-ROM
- The future of journals
- Publishing on the internet
- How to write a grant application
- How to publish a research paper
- Writing a letter
- Updating your CV